

The Logic of Grace in Acts 15:1-12: Possible Ways to African Biblical Exegesis

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Abstract

The narrative of Acts 15 is a story of two ideological and socio-cultural divides coming together on a table for unity of purpose. It is one of the turning points in the messianic interpretation of the divine plan for the salvation of all nations: Jews and Gentiles alike. The story is a watershed in multicultural biblical exegesis. It is an affirmative step in the inculturation of the word of God. Its hermeneutic implication is far-reaching and challenging. It demonstrates the literary and theological acumen of Luke, the narrator, who becomes more endearing to the contemporary logical mind, who sees in the narrative structure the logical flow of the divine plan. Consequently, this study highlights the logic therein, in Luke's effort to grapple with the action of God to bring the whole human race to a commonwealth, which has been established, and is now ruled by the 'law' of the new covenant. The study applies communicative rhetoric and logical semantic methods within the New Testament exegetical domain. It examines the incidents of Acts 15:1-12 in the light of Lukan theology of grace. It argues that, though Luke could not have anticipated the modern scholarship of multicultural and interdisciplinary biblical exegesis, the discourse of Acts 15 still makes it possible today to speak of indigenous and cross-cultural biblical exegesis, hence African biblical exegesis. But the study warns that the potential of multicultural and interdisciplinary biblical exegesis does not suggest that *anyway* is the *way* of exegesis. It simply states: that there are *many ways* that lead to the *way* of exegesis. This is thanks to Acts 15, which remains today one of the indispensable resources for African Christian biblical exegesis and theology.

Keywords:

Theology of grace, the Christian Pharisees, the Council of Jerusalem, Peter and James

Introduction

The story of Acts 15, understood in its literary, historical and theological settings, is a summary account of one of the greatest missionary moments in the life of the early Church. It is about the council at Jerusalem, which brings the transition between

Jewish and Gentile evangelism to light.¹ It is about certain significant and decisive incidents in the making of the Church. Incidentally, it is the story of Cornelius (10:1-11:18) that forms the background to the story, and its settings are Antioch and Jerusalem. Although Wall argues that Acts 15 is more of a rest stop than a gateway for bringing the ‘gospel to the end of the earth’² it is assumed here that the Antioch-Jerusalem incident is a jump in the missionary threshold. It officially concludes the debate on the *unconditional* acceptance of the Gentiles, setting aside circumcision and the observance of the Laws of Moses as prerequisites to participate fully as members of the ‘new eschatological community’. White and Bruce may respectively suggest that before the incident of Cornelius, the Jerusalem Church probably takes the necessity of circumcision for granted.³ It explains why the encounter of the Gospel with other ethnic groups becomes a daunting challenge. The story presumes the experience of Peter with Cornelius as the first affirmative action of the Church to bring Jews and other nations to one table and make an official pronouncement in favour of a ‘Law-free mission’.

But reading between the lines of Acts 15, one may infer that the acclamation in Acts 11:18 could not have gone well with some zealots of the law or the Judaizers in the Jerusalem Church. They have certain concerns partly for their passion for the religious and socio-cultural uniqueness of the Jewish nation. It was in the bid to protect their cultural uniqueness as Jews that occasioned the mission from Judea (v.1a).⁴ Though without any official authorisation from the Jerusalem apostles and elders (v.24), they typify themselves as custodians of the Jewish tradition.⁵ They press on the necessity for circumcision as a prerequisite for salvation (v.1b). Their teaching, however, contradicts the divine plan and the Petrine-Pauline teachings. It challenges the nature of God’s universal salvation within the household of Israel, which has earlier been established (11:1-18). There were serious that generated dissension and confusion in Antioch (v.2a). Hence the community decided to send Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem for the final resolution of the matter (v.2b**Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

¹ Morrison, Decree of the Council

² Wall

³ White 189; Bruce 329.

⁴ Judea is understood as a kind of circumlocution referring to Jerusalem.

⁵ Wall.



When the delegates arrive in Jerusalem, a group belonging to the Christian Pharisees (v.5a**Error! Bookmark not defined.**) raises another objection that appears similar to the Antiochene incident though with a new dimension. The Gentiles are not only to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses. They must observe the laws of Moses (v.5b). The Antiochene soteriological concern is partially suppressed or set aside to make a case for more constructive halakhic and ecclesiological demands (v.5b**Error! Bookmark not defined.**). Wall proposes two reasons for the shift: (i) the question could have been considered irrelevant because they have already been settled in the first meeting of the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem (11:1-18)⁶ and its effect were already evident in the first missionary enterprise of Paul and Barnabas (13:42-52; 14:8-10); (ii) the protest movement in Antioch has no official authorization from Jerusalem (v.24). However, to address the demands of the Christian Pharisaic group and put a seal to the Antiochene incident, the apostles and elders of the Church came together (v.6). The prominence given to the event leads to various interpretations. For Dibelius, it is making too much out of the little story of Cornelius.⁷ In White's thinking, the meeting occurs at a moment of great important Jewish feasts, hence witnessed by many Jewish Christians.⁸ However, the theological understanding of the event is of more relevance to this study. It demonstrates God's redemptive plans as represented in the report of the major actors.⁹ It is on this ground that a compromise is struck. The consensus is that the identity mark of Christians is neither circumcision nor the law of Moses but *faith* in the Lord Jesus Christ (v.11). Therefore, Gentiles may live freely *as* Gentiles and be saved just as the Jews. The Gentiles should also in return respect the sensibility of their fellow Christian Jews within the community by upholding the fourfold prohibition (vv.20**Error! Bookmark not defined.**, 29**Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

However, the study limits itself to analysing the 'logic of grace' in the first part of the story (vv.1-12) as communicated by the principal actors in the narrative—the τῖνες from Judea and in Jerusalem (vv.1 & 5) Barnabas and Paul (vv.3-4; 12) and Peter (vv.7-11).

⁶ Achtemeier 49-55 suggests that Paul's version of the Jerusalem Council in Galatians 2 is actually closer to Acts 11:1 -18 than to Acts 15:1 -29.

⁷ Dibelius, Apostelkonzil 85; Dibelius, Das Apostelkonzil.

⁸ White 190.

⁹ Wall

The study applies respectively the communicative rhetoric and logical semantic methods of Okoronkwo¹⁰ and Kempson¹¹ within the New Testament exegesis. It examines the incidents of Acts 15:1-12 in the light of Lukan theology of grace. The emphasis will be on the socio-religious and theological interest of the narrative. Surprisingly, the reader observes how a ‘word’ may occasion various reactions from different individuals and groups, and sometimes contrary to the aim and objective of the user of the word. By subjecting the narrative to the semantic logical analysis of entailment and presupposition, the validity of the claims of the principal actors is tested, and the basis for the ‘logic of grace’ is established. The study further underscores the African experience as the basis for the profound understanding of the African biblical project in the quest to appreciate God more. This is related to the fundamental difference between Antioch and Jerusalem.

The Background of the Antioch-Jerusalem Incidents

The Mosaic Law and the traditions of the elders anchored on Yahwistic monotheism are the foundation of the Jewish religion and theology. They are uncompromisingly real for an average Jew, whose relationship with the Gentiles oscillates between sympathy and apathy, and sometimes generates hatred. To be a Gentile is for an average Jew synonymous with sin. The Gentiles are ‘God-less’, idolaters and culpably ignorant of the knowledge of Yahweh.¹² They have no sound moral instincts, and there is no vice beyond them. Hence, they stand in contrast to the chosen people of God. However, proselytization may be seen as a way of redeeming them, though their corrupt nature makes redemption an impossible mission.¹³

Again, the tenacity of the Jews to the rite of circumcision (Exod 12:48-49) and the observance of the Law, especially in keeping with Sabbath and diet (Isa 56:6-7), are major external practices that socially spot them among other nations. The practices have significant impacts on Jewish ideologies and politics even beyond Palestine.¹⁴ They are often considered more fundamental than the theology of their religion.¹⁵ But the surprise is that circumcision is not of Jewish origin but Egyptian practice (Diodorus, 1.28.3, 1.55.5 and Strabo, 17.2.5.824). It was later adopted by many

¹⁰ Okoronkwo, Jerusalem Compromise.

¹¹ Kempson.

¹² Okoronkwo, Jerusalem Compromise, 216.

¹³ Okoronkwo, Jerusalem Compromise

¹⁴ Rajak 1

¹⁵ Goodman 39



different nations even before the Jews (Strabo, 16.4.9.771), yet it remains a distinct mark of the Jews. It defines the Jewish identity (1 Macc 1:60-6; 2:46) as a covenant people (Gen 17). To define one's Jewishness outside circumcision is tantamount to apostasy. It is enough ground for exclusion from the covenant community (1 Macc 1:11-15). Every proselyte who opts for full participation in the community and expects to share in Israel's blessings (cf. 3:25-26) is thus to be circumcised.¹⁶

However, the literal observance of the rite gradually waters down in the diaspora. It becomes a question of the heart rather than flesh (see Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; 9:25 LXX; Rom 2:29). This 'new prevailing interpretation' turns into good news for the Gentiles proselytes, who are now saved from the physical pain, the cultural shame and the butt of many jokes. The circumcised are looked down on as sadists, who set about deforming themselves physically and psychologically. They are socially disqualified to participate in the Olympics.¹⁷ It is for the Gentiles a form of rendering the *active inactive*, the *strong impotent* in a society where weakness and physical deformities are ridiculed and despised as the worst curse and misfortune that could befall a citizen. The social consequences are too much for many Gentiles to bear.¹⁸ Although it signifies the final step from paganism to Judaism (Juvenal *Satires* 14.96-99), it remains a stumbling block to many 'God fearers' who would wish to be complete proselytes. Paul himself is not ignorant of this when he argues against the circumcision of the Christian Gentiles. His allegorical interpretation of the rite, as Feldman observes, might well have been influenced by the general hostility of the Greco-Roman world to the practice of circumcision.¹⁹ A *comparable* Jewish religion devoid of circumcision and other Jewish laws will be an attraction to many Gentiles. The Gentiles became a dominant group in the new religion, which is still distinct from the Jewish sect.²⁰

It is also important to note that the tacit approval of the Petrine account of the conversion of uncircumcised Cornelius (11:1-18) is a gradual but consistent erosion of physical circumcision. The decision may not go well with the traditional Jews from Judea who believe that the apostasy of Maccabean Syria is returning to the Barnabas-Pauline mission in Antioch.²¹ Therefore, it is appropriate that those

¹⁶ Wall

¹⁷ Feldman 155

¹⁸ Hengel and Schwemer 64

¹⁹ Feldman 155

²⁰ Morrison, *Christians and the Law of Moses*

²¹ Wall

demanding the strict observance of the rite must come from Judea with Jerusalem as the epicentre of Jewish religious conservatism. The urgency to travel down from Judea to Antioch to bring the believers to orthodoxy and resist further erosion of the Jewish socio-cultural and religious identity is unavoidable. In addition, they are on a rescue mission, born out of concern for the salvation of the Gentile Christians of Antioch.²² By presenting the story, Luke's interest in protecting the Jewish heritage of the Christian faith is obvious and radical. *The spiritual crisis as Luke sees it is the possible loss of a distinctively Jewish memory without which the church cannot be the church.* Thus, he strongly holds to the validity of circumcision and the laws as socio-cultural and religious demands (Lk 1:59f; 2:21f; Act 7, esp. 7:8; 16:1-3; 18:18; 20:16; 21:20; 25:8; 28:17)²³ and simultaneously makes a case for both Gentiles and Jews:

Even as God does not require uncircumcised Gentile converts to follow conventional Jewish practices (i.e., circumcision) for Christian fellowship with Jewish believers, neither does God require repentant Jews to forsake their ancestral traditions out of loyalty to the Messiah.²⁴

The above claim is further demonstrated in the narrative communicative structure of the story.

The Narrative Communicative Structure

It is remarkable to observe in the narrative how Luke manipulates certain elements of communication to underscore God's divine plans and human responses, sometimes opposing the divine initiative. It traces the antiquity of the divine initiative and Yahweh's faithfulness among the people, both Jews and Gentiles. To appreciate the importance of Luke's theology of divine grace, the direct and indirect speeches of the individual characters will be closely analysed.

The τινες: The identity of the τινες in vv.1 & 5 is an issue in a previous study.²⁵ Conscious of the claim of the Western text, which identifies the τινες in vv. 1a & 5b as identical, the matter of their identity has been settled in earlier studies.²⁶ The story as narrated does not say or imply that the τινες of v.1a is identical to the τινες of v.5b. The demands made by the two groups are equally different, although they share some common features. Deploying the tools of "the propositional calculus," "the calculus

²² Shelley 164

²³ Ukwuegbu 163-64

²⁴ Wall

²⁵ Okoronkwo, Logical Semantic 187-200

²⁶ Okoronkwo, Logical Semantic 187-200; Okoronkwo, Jerusalem Compromise



of predicative functions” and “Venn’s diagram,” the difference between the two parties is highlighted. According to the findings, both parties are Christian believers and zealots of the Law. However, some of the guest teachers in Antioch are not Pharisees. The discussion further shows that *not all* the Christian Pharisees in Jerusalem could have agreed to the Antiochene and Jerusalem demands.²⁷ Secondly, the respective demands in Antioch and Jerusalem are not identical, though they share some common socio-cultural and religious elements. The emphasis is very important in light of Huie’s teaching on the role of the particle τε (v.5).²⁸ According to him, the function of the particle is periphrastic. It connects the two verbs περιτέμνειν (“to instruct”) and τηρεῖν (“to keep”), which could have been expressed by a single verb. “Therefore, the meaning of the Pharisees’ statement is that it was necessary to circumcise the Gentiles in order to *instruct* AND to *keep* the Law of Moses. The Pharisees believe that the act of circumcising the Gentiles serves a dual purpose: to educate the Gentiles on the Law of Moses and encourage them to practise the Law. However, Huie’s interpretation violates the integrity of the text. The two arguments (vv.1 & 5) are not the same. They are in two different but related directions. The first is on salvation and the second on fellowship, which respectively may be expressed in theological terms as soteriology and ecclesiology.

Consequently, the proposition of the τινες of v.1, who claim authority but lack it (v.24) will be the major focus of this section. The presence of this group in Antioch, and the subsequent issue that would be raised in Jerusalem, is evidence that many zealots in Palestine still believe that circumcision is tied to salvation. This makes the Gentile salvation a little more than a side issue. The socio-psychological stress that is applied in the narrative reveals the concern of the τινες, who find it very difficult to accept that Gentiles can be saved as equal members of the Church without first being circumcised according to the custom of Moses (v.1). It draws attention on Christian identity. Thus, it questions the relationship between Christian salvation and circumcision. Is circumcision a boundary mark of Christianity? It challenges the future of the Christian message. It places Christianity on an identity danger list and proffers a definition that classifies the new religion as a Jewish sect that only preaches in addition to the belief in Jesus as the Christ.

However, the consideration in this section is to evaluate the *effect* of the propositions of the τινες in Antioch and Jerusalem. Huie suggestion at this point may be helpful. He alerts the reader of Acts 15 on the difference between the traditional Jewish

²⁷ Contra Guzik

²⁸ Huie

understanding of circumcision as a command found in the Law of Moses (Lev 12:1) and the interpretation by the messianic Jews (τινες from Judea). The latter makes circumcision a command for the Passover (Exod 12:43-49) without disputing the fact that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Passover and the source of salvation (v.11). But the interpretation of circumcision as a Passover command makes the Gentiles strangers within the community. Consequently, if any wishes to save the self, one must unconditionally purify the self as stipulated in Exod 12.²⁹

To understand the logic of the narrative structure of the story is to recognise first that it is the objection to Paul's Gentile mission that frames the "case study" of the appropriate practices of Gentile converts within the church.³⁰ For Luke, the Gentile practice demands an explanation that may not set the faith at variance from the normal Jewish practice. Thus, he posits a logical narrative structure that exploits the same domain of the verb of communication to address *almost* identical issues that seem to yield *almost* identical effects. The analysis adapts most of the earlier arguments of Okoronkwo.³¹

<i>Verb of Communication</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Effect</i>
1ab=teaching	v.1b=circumcision according to the custom of Moses	2a=discord and debate
5ab=saying	v.5b=circumcision and the Law of Moses	7a=debate

Table I: The Rhetoric Communication Structure of the Claims of the τινες and its Effect

The logical structure informs the reader that the respective propositions of the τινες (vv.1b & 5b) can be read as a loose form of cognitive synonym within the same sociolinguistic domain. They have some common linguistic elements and similar theological expressions (the custom/law of Moses³²). Again, one is mindful of the difference between the adverbial clause "according to the custom of Moses" modifying the verb "to circumcise" and the independent clause "the law of Moses," which is separate from the necessity "to be circumcised." Hence the demand in Antioch is only one, while in Jerusalem, it is doublefold. The question is whether faith in Jesus is enough to save the Gentile converts or should they in addition be

²⁹ Huie

³⁰ Wall

³¹ Okoronkwo, Jerusalem Compromise

³² For Burkhard, the figure of Moses in Acts 15 is an interesting theme, which **Burkhard J.**, "Zweierlei Anfang", 151-56 in his study of the text has given some attention.



circumcised following the custom of Moses (v.1) or be circumcised and in addition be urged to keep the Law of Moses?³³.

The Role of Peter

From Luke's narrative point of view, it is evident that the Judean protest in Antioch has earlier been addressed in Joel's prophecy as cited in Pentecost (2:17-21). This is advanced in the decisive testimony at the earlier meeting in the Jerusalem Council (see 11:4-17). The story of Cornelius will be condensed in the story in his speech, for it is assumed that the details are well known. He refers to it in a nutshell and draws the implications from it³⁴ In his opening speech, Peter applies an emotionally inviting and inclusive phrase word (Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, ἀκούσατέ μου.) to draw the attention of the council. He demonstrates his emotional connection to the history of his own people and at the same time appeals to experience and personal history, thus recounting the work God has already done among the Gentiles. He makes the point that God has fully received the Gentiles without being ritually circumcised.

Peter makes it clear that the church's mission to uncircumcised Gentiles is God's "choice." It is the fulfilment of God's redemptive purposes. It is God himself who makes his choice among you (v. 7; cf. 11:5-14). It is the God who reads the heart of everyone [irrespective of ritual circumcision], who testifies to them [=Gentiles] by giving them [=Gentiles] the Holy Spirit (v. 8; cf. 11:15) as was given to the Jews. God has not made any distinction between the Gentiles and the Jews (v. 9; cf. 11:12, 17).³⁵ Each receives the spirit in fullness. If that is the case as history reveals, why should the Church not? If God receives them, so should the church. The interpretation does not change the understanding of Peter about the divine plan (Acts 15:8; cf. 1:24; 2:4; 10:47; 11:15, 17). The Holy Spirit is the trustworthy indicator of the spiritual status of the Gentiles. It is God at work. Therefore, no one should be called 'common,' 'unclean' or 'unholy' (10:38), and ritual circumcision may not be necessary as a means of salvation. There is here a strong appeal to the rabbinic teaching on spiritual circumcision, for God already purifies the hearts of the Gentiles by faith and by giving the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life (11:18), not by ritual circumcision.

This is publicly revealed in the conversion and acceptance of Cornelius without any ritual purification (10:15). The testimony has earlier received acclamation in Jerusalem in praise of God that "has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that

³³ Guzik

³⁴ Tannehill 184-85

³⁵ Wall

leads to life” (11:18). Therefore, the rhetorical question in v. 10 is a reminder that given the divine interventions and the earlier theological judgments, the circumcision of the Gentiles should no longer be a subject of debate. To set aside all these is to subvert God’s redemptive purpose since the time of the prophets. It is simply putting God to the test by “placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke” neither the contemporaries of Peter nor their ancestors have been able to bear. The emphasis of Peter in the text is not on the “traumatic and debilitating” experience of the rite of circumcision or on “a physically burdensome ‘yoke’.”³⁶ The law for an average Jew is a happy and privileged ‘burden. It is one of the privileges that distinguishes the Jews from other nations. Rather, Peter argues that the socio-religious history of Israel is marred by a chain of failures and unfaithfulness to the demands of circumcision. For the Jews to insist on the circumcision of the Gentile is a height of hypocrisy. Luke allows his character to couch the yoke argument in a rhetoric interrogative form. This is strategic because the answer is self-evident and directed against the circumcision party. It indirectly claims that circumcision belongs to the Jews as a people.

Again, it has been suggested elsewhere, contrary to Wall’s interpretation, that Peter’s argument is not like Paul’s. Peter takes note of the position of his opponents, admits their total acceptance of God’s gift to the Gentiles (11:18), and then proceeds to advise them. Peter and Paul could have reached the same conclusion, but through different lines of reasoning (see Rom 2:25-29).³⁷ However, the reader may agree with Wall that the argument is neither novel nor revolutionary. It is built upon an earlier teaching of the Torah that true circumcision is a matter of the heart (see Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:26; Ezek 44:7-9). Therefore, the identity of the disciple, whether Jew or Greek, must be predicated on different grounds from Torah purity. It must be evinced by a new life in the Spirit who circumcises the believer’s heart and enables the disciple to live in a transformed manner (see Rom 2:28-29). To insist otherwise is a subversion of the traditional Jewish theology of trusting in a faithful God, who, for the messianic Jews, saves “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (v. 11). With the climatic Christocentric soteriological dogma by Peter in v.11, the assembly is brought to a still.

The logic of Peter is a profound logic of divine grace. While he criticises the Jews for their unfaithfulness to the Law, which they are now insisting that the Gentile should observe, he never criticises the Law itself. The Law, for him, is a happy and

³⁶ Huie

³⁷ Okoronkwo, Jerusalem Compromise. Contra Wall.



joyful burden. But his main concern is the hypocrisy of compelling the Gentiles to do that which the Jews themselves are still struggling to meet up with. Again, the emphasis is not that the Jews should abandon the Law, but that the Gentiles ought not to be given the additional burden, which has no direct bearing on Christian salvation. So, the Gentiles should not be forced to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses. Thus, the table below helps the reader to have an overview of the logic that brings the great silence.

Verb	Content			Effect
	God's Action	Human Response	Conclusion	
7b=saying	7-9=Divine initiative, witness and impartiality.	10=contradiction	11=universal salvation for Jews and Gentiles	Christo-soteriological understanding and creating a context for Paul's speech (v.12)

Table II: The Rhetoric Communication Structure of Peter's Argument and its Effect

The deep silence at this moment prepares the stage for Barnabas and Paul to recount their missionary experience for the third time (vv.12, 3-4; 14:27-28) without any public opposition (v.12).

The Announcement by Barnabas and Paul: The three occasions that Barnabas and Paul speak are reported as 'free indirect speeches'. This makes it a little difficult to give them the detailed analysis they should deserve. But following Luke's report, they are in praise of God's work among the Gentiles and in defence of the Gentile mission. They evoke three diverse reactions:

Verb	Content		Effect	Status
	God's Action	Human Response		
3b=saying	The conversion of the Gentiles (v.3a)	Joy (v.3b)	Agreement	+
4b=saying	All that God has done	Opposition (v.5)	Disagreement and Debate	-
12=Saying	All the signs and wonders God has done	Listening	Silence and understanding	(+?)

Table III: The Rhetoric Communication Structure of Barnabas and Paul's Argument and its Effect

Barnabas and Paul confirmed Peter's previous point. Their testimony (v.12) moves along the same prophetic lines as Peter's. By speaking of "signs and wonders" (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα), they invoke the traditional language of the prophetic Spirit (cf. 2:19,22, 43; 4:16, 22, 30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6, 13; 14:3).³⁸ It is v.12 that explains the cause

³⁸ L. T. Johnson 263

of joy in vv.3 & 4. The Church or the Christians of Phoenicia and Samaria will rejoice at what God is doing with and among the Gentiles, contrary to the feelings and actions of the *τινεις* “coming down from Judea.” (v.1a) and the reactions of the *τινεις* in Jerusalem (v.5b). Notably, prior to the information given in v.12, Luke informs his reader about the *great* joy of the Phoenician and Samaritan believers (v.3) for what God has done for the Gentiles—how God opens the door of faith to the Gentiles. It is the action of Yahweh that occasions the joy and happiness in Phoenicia and Samaria, and in the Jewish-dominated community of Jerusalem. Following the narrative logic, the *τινεις* in both Antioch and Jerusalem are in a bad picture. They are the weak and bad minority. They are ones, who oppose the Gentile mission, which approves from the beginning.³⁹

Table III further highlights the conflicting views and theologies within the Jerusalem community. The psychology is envy and jealousy for the unprecedented success of the ‘other’. Luke’s courage to stress the official stand of the Church contrary to the sentiments of the small powerful group of the circumcision party (v.5a) is of notice.

The human response of the various groups in the narrative includes: joy and peace, opposition and rejection, and the meditative silence and positive stance for the divine grace come to the fore. The responses can psychologically be interpreted as stages of spiritual awareness or development. Such reading gives more meaning to an Igbo reader. It is to be noted that the combined witness of Peter, Barnabas and Paul to the nature of Gentile conversion is about circumcision (v.1). It does not address, strictly speaking, the challenge of table fellowship, which is implied in the demand from the *τινεις* in Jerusalem (v.5). The study will go further to test the validity of Peter’s testimony based on the proposition of the *τινεις* of Antioch. It will adopt the semantic logical analysis of entailment and presupposition as represented in Kempson.⁴⁰

The Theoretical Foundation of the Narrative Semantic Logical Analysis

The semantic logical structure of the narrative is interpreted through the lens of entailment and preposition. The idea is generated from the interest to establish the truth of the propositions, which depend crucially on the possibility of identifying their respective referent.⁴¹ Entailment or implication is generally understood in terms of logical relation between propositions (statements/sentences and/or clauses) such

³⁹ Morrison, Decree of the Council

⁴⁰ Kempson.

⁴¹ Fasold 121



that the truth of the second proposition necessarily flows from the truth of the first. In logical terms, it would mean, that if p entails q , q is then a necessary implication of p . But the negation of p (which implies the falsity of its positive congener) does not imply q .⁴² In the thinking of Kempson, "...any sentence S_1 will entail a sentence S_2 if when S_1 is true, S_2 must also be true. Furthermore, if S_2 is false, its entailing sentence S_1 will also be false ($S_1=p$ and $S_2=q$). In other words, the truth of q is independent of p .⁴³ But if q is false, then p becomes automatically false. The weakness of the argument is the ambiguity that could ensue if the truth value of q is determined solely on p since the negation of p does not necessarily imply q .

The basic intuition behind the notion of the 'presupposition' is the relationship between the *thing said* (or *ought to have been said*) and *the thing which is the case*. It is the latter that gives sense to the former.⁴⁴ So, if p is what is *said*, then q as its presupposition must be that, which ought to be the case in order for p to make sense. The truth condition of q as presupposition must then follow strictly from p , in the sense that for q to presuppose p (replication), the truth of q must follow from the truth of p . But if q is false then p will have no truth value, i.e. its truth condition cannot be determined. Adapting Ruth Kempson's table,⁴⁵ the relationship between entailment and presupposition may then be represented as follows:

Entailment (implication)	Presupposition (replication)
$p \rightarrow q$ $T \rightarrow T$ $F \leftarrow F$ $F \rightarrow T \vee F$	$p \rightarrow q$ $T \rightarrow T$ $-(T \vee F) \leftarrow F$ $F \rightarrow T$

⁴² Kempson 142.

⁴³ Fasold

⁴⁴ Fasold 166

⁴⁵ Kempson 143

Stressing the relationship between the semantic entailment and presupposition, it may be stated that p and $\sim p$ *logically entail* q if and only if (if) in every situation that makes p true or false, makes q true. It can also be interpreted in terms of bivalence (p is true, or p is false) and negation (p is true or $\sim p$ is true), which in each case q is *always* true.⁴⁶ The truth of q in terms of presupposition is determined in a reversal form. In other words, the truth of q is derived from the truth of p . That is, q presupposes p . The logical apparatus makes it possible to move from the bivalence 2-truth-value to the trivalence 3-truth-value, where there is the possibility of a proposition being *true*, *false* and *neither true nor false* (indeterminate). Following strictly the principles of entailment and presupposition, the claims of the $\tau\upsilon\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ (v.1) and Peter (vv.7-11) can now be tested.

The $\tau\upsilon\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ (v.1) and Peter (vv.7-11)

The argument here is that the protest in Antioch is partially addressed by Peter's reference to Joel's prophecy at Pentecost. The account stresses God's redemptive pattern which dates back to these "last days" and is now brought to fulfilment in those who call upon Jesus as Lord. These, once non-believers, are now saved from sin and initiated into a community of goods ruled over by the Spirit of God (see 2:17-21, 38).⁴⁷ This is so articulated by Peter in a Christo-soteriological credo: "We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as [Gentiles] will" (v.11). The 'Petrine' creed situates the Jews and Gentiles on the equal pedestal (v.9) as members of the same God's family. But this does not in any way suggest the abolition of ethnic identity, neither does it understate the socio-cultural nor religious significance of ethnic identity. It is a clear statement on divine grace which has overwhelmed the lives of the disciples.

But the option here is to review Peter's logic (vv.7-11) in line with the proposition of the $\tau\upsilon\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ (v.1b), which contains a conditional statement. The proposition is thus classified into a protasis (Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses = $\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu \mu\eta \pi\epsilon\tau\iota\tau\mu\eta\theta\eta\tau\epsilon \tau\tilde{\omega} \epsilon\theta\epsilon\iota \tau\tilde{\omega} \text{Μωϋσέως}$) and an apodosis (you cannot be saved = $\omicron\upsilon \delta\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\sigma\theta\epsilon \sigma\omega\theta\eta\upsilon\alpha\iota$). The former is labelled p and the latter q . Speaking from the principle of entailment and presupposition, it means that the truth of the apodosis q is derived from the protasis p , since the protasis entails the apodosis, and

⁴⁶ This is adapted from Levinson 175.

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apodosis presupposes the protasis. But once the apodosis is false, the truth value of the protasis is invariably affected. That is, the counteraction of the apodosis (cf. v.11) automatically renders the protasis under entailment false and leaves the protasis under presupposition without any truth value, hence indeterminate. Putting the same statement in another form, one may argue that the exposition of a proposition without any truth-value leaves the proposition with the possibility of multiple meanings, and sometimes with contrary or contradictory meanings.

But the surprise in the entire argument is that no direct reference is made to the protasis ('circumcision')⁴⁸ by Peter if "purifying their hearts by faith" (=v.9: *τῇ πίστει καθαρίσας τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν*) is not interpreted as a reference to circumcision at least from the point of view of spiritual circumcision. Peter's concentration is on the apodosis (salvation) of the *τινες*.⁴⁹ This can be justified for it is within the inner structure of the apodosis that the strength of the claims of the *τινες* lies.

Symbolically represented:

The position of the *τινες* = a, and Peter's view = b.

$a = \sim p \rightarrow \sim q$ i.e. no p (no circumcision) implies no q (no salvation).

$b = \sim (\sim p \rightarrow \sim q)$ i.e. it is not the case that (no circumcision) implies no q (no salvation).

So, the position of Peter could be interpreted as a *negation* of either of the propositions of the *τινες* (the *negative* protasis and the *negative* apodosis), in which p is false under the principle of implication, or q is false under the principle of replication, thus exposing the ambivalence of the truth-value of p.

The only condition, however, under which the proposition could be true is:

$(\sim p \rightarrow q) \equiv p \leftarrow q = T.$

The condition, in which p or q is expressed as a *positive* logical propositional value is only transformational, and not original. It is a derivation of the original logical

⁴⁸ Could v.9β *τῇ πίστει καθαρίσας τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν* not be seen as reference to circumcision, at least from the point of view of spiritual circumcision?

⁴⁹ Dibelius, *Christliche Historiker* 115.

structure (v.1b). Even if this is accepted for the sake of argument, nevertheless, it renders the proposition of the $\tau\iota\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ impotent.

Again, Peter's argument, which also centres on the divine initiative (v.7), witness (v.8) and impartiality (v.9), entails v.11, and v.11 presupposes vv.7-9. Therefore, one may argue in view of the logical implication and replication that the truth of vv.7-9 or v.11 is valid independent of the other. With such structural logic, Peter's argument is hedged. It means that even if the facts presented by Peter (vv.7-9) are at any stage proved to be logically invalid, it does not affect the validity of v.11, for the truth-value of the conclusion of the argument q (v.11) is independent of p (vv.7-9), and vv.7-9 must not necessarily imply v.11. It is simply the *logic of the divine grace*, which does not depend on and cannot be interpreted as an absolute necessary condition. It stresses the possibility of either p or q being weak (logically false) without affecting the truth value of the other.

A Critical Comment on Peter's Logic

Suffices it to mention in this discussion that the testimonies of Peter (vv. 7-11; cf. 11:1-18), and of Barnabas and Paul (v. 12) explain the full meaning of Joel's prophecy that God has poured out the Holy Spirit upon witnesses to carry God's word into the whole world, to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. All who repent and call upon the Lord Jesus in faith are saved from their sins and receive the gift of the Spirit in equal measure.⁵⁰ Although Wall is correct to suggest that the combined witness of Peter, Barnabas and Paul to the nature of Gentile conversion will provide the raw material for James's commentary on a prophecy from Amos (vv. 13-21), it is deficient in many respects. The witness is only on the strength of personal experience or revelation, which may appear inconclusive to an orthodox Jew. Secondly, the witness of Peter does not directly address the challenge of table fellowship, though it may presuppose Acts 11:2. Peter's primary interest is in circumcision. The relevance of the Torah for the Jewish Christians which is implied in the demand from the $\tau\iota\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ in Jerusalem (v.5) is not laid on the table. Hence the argument is inconclusive. The issue of table fellowship is an ecclesiological issue that may demand historical, scriptural and traditional proofs for its settlement. Luke is aware of this, hence introduces a second of the argument, which falls outside the consideration of this current study. It is another aspect of the study, which allows the same methodological approach using the rhetoric-communicative and logical tools

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for the validity test. But the second concern of the study is the impact of the logic of divine grace on the African question.

James' speech into the story. In other words, it is for James to conclude the inconclusive argument of Peter by addressing some ethical issues revolving around the daily life of the Gentiles with their fellow Jewish believers, especially in an environment where the Jews are a minority. Thus, it is no longer whether a Jew can dine with a Gentile, but how can it be handled without offending the sensibility of the Jew. It becomes another area of study, probably using the same narrative-communicative and logical tools for the test.

The African Question

The Judaizers are quickly but unfortunately misrepresented as bad actors on an organised stage. Their contribution to the advancement of the gospel is surprisingly substantial and helpful. They are true Jewish Christians. They are zealous about the customs and the Law not for their selfish interest but for the good of the church. They seek to complement Paul's gospel by insisting that the basics of Judaism are a condition for admitting Gentiles into the covenant community. They expressed openly their worries and doubts about the status of their Gentile counterparts. Their basic question is whether an uncircumcised Gentile can be part of God's people along with Israel. Can a person be faithful to God without keeping the key elements of the covenant? Their dogma may appear contrary to the official stand of the church, but it initiates a theological process that challenges the church to make a definite statement about its identity as a people belonging to God.⁵¹ As Wall puts it: Reform and renewal are sometimes the Spirit-led results of open protest and debate between earnest believers of the same congregation. This is a treasure in Luke's account; hence the prospect of the conflict is treated with considerable optimism.⁵²

Again, Peter, seen from an African background, is an elder whose wealth of experience plays an indispensable role and commands a high level of credibility. He is the first among the Twelve to cooperate fully in the Gentile mission. He is the first to experience the opening of the door for the Gentiles without circumcision but through faith. His experience leads him to convince his fellow Jews (11:2-14) that both Jews and Gentiles can receive the same Holy Spirit and salvation irrespective of their divergent socio-religious makeup (11:15-18). His speech underscores the action of God within the messianic community of goods. It poses a serious question

⁵¹ Johnson, Decision Making

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about who God is and how God can act and be understood in communities with different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. It reminds the reader that disagreements may sometimes erupt from earnest efforts to understand Jesus and the Father. This is often but unfortunately the case with African ideas and world views. Nevertheless, the debate in Jerusalem encourages all parties in the project of Jesus to take each other seriously, whether African, Asian or their Western counterparts. The central message of Luke is, among others, that God who made us Greek or Jew, will save us as Greek or Jew. This does not imply that the Jews are free to disregard the Law or the Greeks to neglect their socio-cultural heritage. The take is the encouragement of indigenous biblical exegesis, be it Western, Asian or African. The peculiarity of each should be respected and acknowledged as a way of enriching one another in the common quest to understand and appreciate God. Differences and/or disagreements in worldview are not enough reasons to take the faith hostage. Methodological differences in biblical readings and interpretation ought to be treasured and stimulated as an enrichment in the understanding of the word of God.

In reading the story of Acts 15 in its narrative context, the reader is reminded that conflict resolution should include the “long view” of the issues, where their entire prehistory informs its present debate.⁵³ This is where African history will come to count: its colonial experience, slave trade, exploitation, imposition of rulers, destruction of socio-economic structures, consistent deprivation of true leadership by its own people (sometimes with foreign influence and powers), pre- and post-independence struggle. This is clearly demonstrated in the Antioch-Jerusalem issue where their theological and hermeneutic differences are linked to long prehistorical and traditional beliefs. For example, strife and disagreements in Antioch and Jerusalem predate Christianity. The root, as the study indicates, dates to the ancient socio-cultural and religious prejudices of the Jewish-Gentile relationship, but now taking a new turn in the context of Christian salvation.

So, when Africans read the bible, they come with various African experiences, which may not be completely treasured without sharing the basic African worldviews and social history. These experiences form the primary evidence and personal testimony in the African understanding of the God of the Bible. These past experiences control their dealings with this God. Therefore, the Africans should be given a listening ear just as Peter (vv.7-11) and then Barnabas and Paul (v.12) testify to the entire assembly what God has done through them; their audience is not only still but listens carefully to their stories (vv.12-13). In such an open and formative debate between

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earnest believers within a congregational setting is largely narrative in shape, existential in substance, and practical in aim. Public and personal testimony in this sense is never a monologue intended to draw attention to the speaker. It is illustrative of a community's witness and serves to shape its identity and future direction.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The Antioch-Jerusalem account brings out clearly the theological and socio-literary implications of the narrative. Stress the socio-literary and theological interest of the narrative. It traces the antiquity of the divine plan and Yahweh's faithfulness in his relationship with the people: the Jews and the Gentiles alike. The contradictions in human response to the faithfulness of God are also brought to the fore. While socio-cultural and religious factors can serve well in identity definition, they can also be counted among the huddles of human appreciation of the divine plan and the process of its realisation. Hence the identification and management of these factors are considered urgent for the preservation of unity within the covenant community. By emphasising the role of divine grace rooted in Jesus, the Christology of the text is never in doubt.

The narrative throws open a challenge to biblical exegesis. It is a pronouncement not only a proclamation of the 'end of the world of the biblical authors'. It announces 'the death of the authors'; for the word they proclaim is a mystery beyond their power. It opens the way to various ways of thought and reflection, hence multicultural and multidisciplinary readings of the bible. It emphasis then is not that *any way* is the *way* of biblical exegesis, but *many ways* are the *way* of exegesis. Once this truth is embraced, the present generation-fear of multicultural and multidisciplinary exegetical approaches be eased. What the exegetes and biblical theologians are grappling with is a mystery that is opened to possible understandings and interpretations but guarded by the tradition of the believing community that constitutes the most important aspect of scripture, for the Christian scripture does not make the believing community, but the believing living community makes the Scripture, while the Scripture modulates the life of the community. It is in this maxim that the courage and strength for African ways of doing biblical exegesis and theology are rooted.

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